

Beautiful Oblivion by LaDemonica

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Summary: In 1986, a year after he thought they killed It, Richie Tozier opens the door into his forgotten childhood and the realization that maybe doing so wasn't such a good idea after all. Slash, BillRichieEddie.

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Title: Beautiful Oblivion

Author: LaDemonica

Rating: PG-13 to R, mainly for language. Pardon the French if you're a religious man (or woman). :P

Genre: Romance/Action/Adventure

Summary: Bookverse, AU. In 1958, Bill, Richie and Eddie became more than just friends. In 1986, a year after the Losers killed It, Richie opens the door into the path of his forgotten childhood and the realization that maybe doing so wasn't such a good idea after all. Bill/Richie/Eddie, SLASH.

Setting: Flashes between the summer of 1958 and the future, after the events of 1985.

DISCLAIMER: Very obviously, Stephen King owns It and all the publishing rights and whatnot. Being sued would quite mess up my life schedule as it is planned ahead of me (go to university, become mad scientist, blow up world, buy milk, cheese, bread, toilet paper . . . oh wait, that's my shopping list).

WARNING: This is a SLASH fic. In case you didn't know, slash is what we call same-sex relationships in the fanfiction world. So if you're homophobic or just don't like the idea of Bill Denbrough, Richie Tozier and Eddie Kaspbrak having a romantic relationship, I suggest you click that "back" button. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Notes: Ever since I'd read It, I'd always been a fan of Bill/Richie, Richie/Eddie, and, of course, Bill/Richie/Eddie. Sadly, I couldn't find any (if anyone has any recommendations, I'd love for you to link me). So I decided to write some of my own. This is the sad, sad result. Oh, well.

Enjoy! And please remember to review. They don't take long but mean the world to me. (Please don't flame, especially about the

pairing or threesome, whatever. They just cause bad feelings, and really, who needs more bad feelings with everything that's happening in the world today?)

Beautiful Oblivion

"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself." – Andy Warhol

Chapter One: *Richie Tozier Has An Epiphany*

1

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon.

Richard Tozier had woken up unusually confused that day. He didn't know exactly why (although he had an idea that it was something related to Yesterday) but he supposed that was what being confused was really all about – when you hadn't a clue what was going on.

Yesterday, as he soon was able to recall, had not been a particularly happy day. As Richie walked down Main, his hands shoved in his pocket and his head down, he wondered just what he had gotten himself into. Everything he had thought he'd known about himself had just up and left at exactly four-thirty-five in the afternoon the day before. Well, nearly everything.

"Richie!" said a voice, seemingly from far away. Richie blinked and abruptly stopped mid-step. Ben Hanscom was on his left, enjoying what looked like a coffee ice cream frappe.

"Heyo, Haystack," he said, taking a seat across. "Havin any good chucks today?"

"Not really," said Ben, looking down at his straw.

"Neither have I," said Richie morosely. "I don't know why -- well, I do know, but still -- but today's a bad day. A real bad day."

"Is that so?" said Ben sympathetically.

Richie just frowned and watched the people on the street go by.

There was a silence, as both Richie and Ben mulled over their depressing thoughts.

"Seen Big Bill around?" Richie asked nonchalantly.

"No," said Ben, frowning. "I haven't seen him since Thursday, actually."

"Oh," said Richie, and there was another pleasant silence. "Well, I gotta go . . ."

"Okay," said Ben, looking slightly crestfallen. "Bye, Richie."

"See ya, Haystack."

A couple of hours later, Richie was to be found wandering across the Canal. He hadn't really been thinking much about anything, and he'd let his legs guide him to wherever they pleased.

He regretted it now.

"Oh, Jesus," he said, as soon as he had looked up and been graced with the wide expanse of the Canal. While he hadn't ever had a personal weird experience with a clown or dead people around here, he'd definitely heard enough stories to know it wasn't a safe place. Determined to keep his weird-experience record clean, he looked away and started to go back the way he'd come.

"Ruh-Richie?"

Richie nearly had a heart attack, then and there. He whipped around and let out a breath of relief. It was only Bill Denbrough, sitting by a tree on the very edge of Bassey Park with Silver beside him.

"Hey, Big Bill," he said, beaming and destroying all thoughts of getting away from the Canal.

"Cuh-Come s-sit down," said Bill, patting the patch of grass beside him. Richie was there in a flash.

"Been up to much?" he asked, rubbing his ass from where he had painfully slammed himself down on the ground.

"No." Bill brought his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around them almost protectively. "Ruh-Richie, cuh-can I ask you suh-something?"

"Go ahead," said Richie cheerfully, crossing his legs and turning his head to look at Bill with his full attention.

"Wuh-When's the luh-last time you had a r-really d-deep th-thought?" Bill asked.

"Thees ole senhorr doan get no deep thoughts," answered Richie promptly. "Eet ees too much work to use thees ole mind, you know –"

"Ruh-Ruh-Richie," said Bill, giving him that look that said he was being serious.

Richie shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, Billy. Something like Wednesday, when I

(don't try to fool yourself Tozier you'll never admit it because you're a fucking coward and a liar and a)

read about the last murder."

"Wuh-What about suh-something unrelated t-to the m-murders? S-Something puh-personal?"

"Yesterday," said Richie softly, all traces of humour gone. "But if you think I'm going to tell you –"

"Puh-Please, Ruh-Richie?" Bill said, and there was a look in his eyes Richie swore he'd never seen before. "Y-You nuh-know you can ch-trust me."

You know you can trust me. And Richie did know. Everyone did. There was something about William Denbrough – maybe it was that pure, innocent light in his eyes, or his genuine willingness to help people – but whatever it was, you just *knew* you could trust him.

The only problem was that Richie didn't trust himself. At all.

"You'll hate me," Richie said, avoiding Bill's fixed stare and looking

towards the Canal, although he was too distracted to really see anything.

"I won't," said Bill firmly. "You're one of my c-closest friends, Ruh-Richie. I could never huh-hate you."

Richie looked back at Bill; the serious look was there again. "All right," he said, taking a deep breath. "All right, I'll tell you." Bill said nothing, just looked at him, that unnerving blue gaze seeming to pierce into his very soul. Richie swallowed the hard lump that was rapidly rising in his throat – if this changed anything, if he lost Bill's friendship, not to mention the others' . . .

"Ruh-Richie?" said Bill hesitantly, and Richie realized he was still waiting for an answer.

"Yesterday," he began, hating himself but realizing that he was the only one who did . . . at the moment. But Bill had said he could never hate Richie, and you could always trust Big Bill. "I was taking a walk and I realized something."

"Y-Yeah?" pushed Bill gently.

(forever and ever and ever you'll die alone he'll hate you they'll all hate you)

Richie opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He gulped down the lump again and looked straight into Bill's eyes. He saw everything in those eyes, those endless depths of complete trust, and he realized that it was all or nothing. He would never ever be able to keep a secret from Bill. They knew each other better than anyone else in the Losers' Club did, except for maybe Eddie. But still, they knew each other too well. If Richie didn't say it now, Bill would figure it out for himself. Maybe not soon, but eventually. Inevitably.

All or nothing. Richie inhaled a sharp breath and the confession was running out of his mouth before he could even begin to get his mind around it. "I'm queer, Bill. I'm fucking queer and I *know* it's nothing to be proud about and I'm feeling so damn confused today because *I am!*" He took a great shuddering gasp and his hands curled into tight fists, his knuckles turning white and his uncut nails pressing small

crescents into his palms. He felt something warm and sticky swell around the tips of his fingers, and he knew he had drawn blood.

The shock was evident in Bill's face and Richie turned away, his glasses steaming up as hot tears threatened to spill out from his eyes. He wouldn't cry, though, because that wouldn't fix anything. It wouldn't fix him, wouldn't make him suddenly like the way a girl's breasts looked and wonder what was under her skirt, as normal boys did. He'd probably never show interest in women, always preferring the flat, hard chest of a man and wanting to touch –

(hate you hate you forever and you'll die alone Tozier because no one likes a fucking fag like you and you'll have no friends none at all)

"H-How did you f-figure th-that out?"

Richie took another deep breath, refusing to look at Bill. He needed a distraction, so he pulled out a long blade of grass and started peeling strips off of it. "I don't like girls. I mean, I like girls, just not in that way. And - and I've been noticing how other guys looked. Being with a girl scares me. Being with a boy doesn't, because I'm around them all the time." He gave a shaky laugh. "That doesn't make sense, does it? But then, nothing about being a fagola makes sense. I'm just one fucked-up kid."

"Don't you dare say that!" Bill said sharply, and Richie had to finally look at him, because he wasn't stuttering, not a word. Bill stood up, looking down at Richie in an accusatory manner. "You're not fucked-up, Richie. For all we know, everyone else is fucked-up and you're just . . . n-normal."

"Normal?" Richie said in a high-pitched voice. "Being a fucking faggot is normal? Don't try to play nice with me, Bill, I know I'm a freak."

"You're not a freak!" said Bill, half-shouting. He looked almost . . . angry? "You're not! If *anyone's* a freak here, it's me! Big Bill Denbrough, can't say a thing without stuttering –"

"You're not anymore," said Richie, in a voice so quiet that for a moment he wondered if Bill had heard him.

Evidently, he had, for Bill's eyes widened and his mouth fell open and he stayed like that for a long time, before he collapsed back down in a sprawl against the tree and shut his eyes.

"Bill?" Richie furrowed his brow, gazing at his friend with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Georgie," Bill muttered, still not opening his eyes. "I almost nuh-never stuttered w-with Juh-Juh-Georgie."

"Oh," said Richie, and for once, he was without a smart-ass remark.

"I'm okay wi-with it, you know," said Bill, and he had finally opened his eyes. "It's okay if y-you're kwuh-kwuh-queer. I don't mind. Not r-really."

"You don't?" Richie asked numbly. He hadn't expected this. He'd expected to be alienated from everyone, off to hide in a little corner with the rest of Derry's shirtlifters. And even if that wasn't the case, he *never* expected he would have a single friend left.

"I suh-said you cuh-could tr-trust me, d-d-didn't I? A-And it's going to t-take a hell of a lot m-more than you n-not l-liking girls f-for me to hate you." Bill hesitated for the briefest of moments, before pulling Richie into a tight hug. "I'll a-always b-be your friend, Ruh-Ruh-Richie, n-no matter what," he said quietly into Richie's ear. Richie closed his eyes, his breath hitching, and he felt more than a little disappointed when Bill pulled away. "You g-get me?"

"Yeah, I get you," Richie said, with a big grin that might have made his cheeks sore after awhile. "Thanks, Big Bill. I needed your support."

"I know, Ruh-Richie. I know."

Bill sighed and slid down the tree so that he was lying on his back. He folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the wide expanse of fat snow-white clouds drifting across the deep blue sky. Richie closed his eyes for a while, then carefully placed his glasses to the side and did the same, settling beside Bill so that their elbows were just barely touching.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Bill whispered dreamily after a minute or so.

Richie turned his head to the side, studying the profile of Bill's head, which was oddly defined despite the fact that he was not wearing his glasses. He let his eyes travel all the way from his slightly mussed dark red hair, which curled a little at the end, down to his rather effeminately long lashes, down his perfectly straight nose, and down to his pale pink lips, which were parted slightly.

"It really is," Richie breathed, though his eyes stayed just where they were. He thought he must've imagined it, but he liked to think Bill's lips curved into a small smile at that.

It was a long time before either of them decided to head home.

2

Beverly often watched Bill. She'd known for a long time how she felt about him – more than a crush, more than an infatuation. She'd known for what seemed like forever that she was in love with him. It didn't matter that she was too young to really know what love was, what the definition of true love was; she loved Bill Denbrough and she didn't need a dictionary to tell her that.

She often fantasized about him loving her, too, gently caressing her cheek and tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear, whispering those words the romantic side of her had always dreamed about. She dreamed about giggling with him and kissing him on the cheek, only somehow managing to miss and kiss him on the mouth instead. She imagined him looking at her with those amazingly powerful blue eyes and kissing her again, this time in a way that didn't stop.

That was all these images were, though – dreams. She knew from the moment she had realized she loved him that he could never love her back. Not truly, not honestly. Not in the way she wanted him to. She knew it was too predictable, too much of a fairytale. Bill deserved so much more than a fairytale – he deserved something different and new and exciting. She had resigned herself to this fact long ago, and, though she still had those romantic fantasies, she knew she'd be nearly just as happy with being the equivalent of a sister to Bill. He'd

still love her, just not in that way, and she'd be fine with that, because it was still love.

It was a humid, overcast day when she first somehow discovered the first piece of the giant puzzle all of this would soon turn out to be. The Losers (just the six of them, as they hadn't yet met their seventh member) were sitting in a circle on the bank of the Kenduskeag. Stan's bird book was open in his lap, his binoculars strung around his neck, but he'd been on the same page for the past fifteen minutes and his eyes were not moving, and there was a faint frown line on his forehead; Eddie was gazing at Bill in that special way he always did, that way that Beverly would soon manage to decipher; Ben was looking at the ground and rubbing a shallow hole into it with his shoe, occasionally glancing at her in a way that he probably thought was inconspicuous; Richie was staring off into space with a distracted look in his eyes, amazingly enough having not said anything in the past five minutes; Bill was fiddling around with an empty Coke bottle, one of the new ones with clear glass, also with that distracted look on his face. Beverly was sitting slightly apart from the circle, lying down with her head against the tree and simply observing the others.

"H-Hey," said Bill suddenly, and everyone looked at their leader with rapt attention. To anyone else, it would have seemed like they had almost been waiting for him to speak. "D-Does anyone want to puh-puh-play a g-game?"

"Ahhh, senhorr, a game?" Richie said, looking extremely relieved that someone had broken the monotony. "What game would thees bee? Guns? Imageenary safaree?"

"N-No, not th-those," said Bill, shaking his head. "I'm getting kinda b-bored of th-those ones. Suh-Something else."

"I have a game we could play," said Stan quietly. "It'd be kind of weird, though, because there's only one girl and five boys . . ."

Eddie turned his head to stare at Stan, and then, to the complete bemusement of the other four, burst out laughing. "Stan!" he choked out. "Stan, you aren't serious!" He began to cough and wheeze, and he quickly dug his aspirator out and took a few short puffs from it.

Stan shrugged, looking uncomfortable. He put his bird book into his waterproof bag and lifted the binoculars over his head, setting them on the ground next to him. "I'm not being serious, not really, but it's the only game I know."

"Have you ever played it before?" asked Eddie, with a quirky smile that seemed more like a smirk. But that couldn't be right, because Eddie never smirked.

"No," said Stan, scrunching up his nose. "Frankly, it's kinda gross when you think about it."

"Ohh," said Richie, and the light in his eyes indicated that he had caught on to Eddie and Stan's little inside joke. Bill, Ben, and Beverly, however were still completely oblivious as to what game they were talking about. "Do my ears deceive me? Is Stan the Man suggesting a naughty game?"

"Naughty?" repeated Ben, alarmed.

"Not horribly naughty," Richie assured him. "But for our age, naughty enough for me to know that our parents would definitely not be happy with us. But who gives a fuck about what our parents think, anyway?" he said, grinning.

"Beep-beep, Richie," said Beverly, but that only made Richie grin wider. "And I still don't get it."

"Sp-Spin the Buh-Bottle," said Bill, grimacing. Beverly and Ben both stared at him before cracking up. "Ih-It wouldn't w-work, though, because Beh-Beh-Beverly's the only g-girl." He only said it in a façade, though, because he knew about one person in the circle who would certainly have no problem playing Spin the Bottle with a group of boys.

"Chances are we'd have to kiss each other nine out of ten times," agreed Stan. "It's stupid, I knew I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, wait," giggled Beverly, whose laughter had finally subsided. "I think we should still play it. It'd just make things interesting." The boys stared at her like she was nuts. She felt the heat crawl up her

neck, but kept an obstinate look on her face..

"Miss Scawlett," said Richie in his Pickaninny Voice, "Miss Scawlett, doan make me kiss those otha boys, they gots cooties!"

"I'm serious!" Beverly said, smiling from ear to ear, despite the flush on her cheeks. "Really, no one else is around, nobody's going to find out and suddenly think you're all a bunch of queers. And it's only kissing."

Bill, who was struggling to keep down a fit of laughter at Beverly's attitude about the whole thing, accidentally let the Coke bottle slip from his fingers. It did not smash, as he had expected, but rolled into the middle of the circle.

"Well," said Stan, blinking at the bottle. "It seems the Coca-Cola Company has made the decision for us."

"Nah, Big Bill dropped that on purpose," said Richie, trying to nod convincingly. "He just wants a go with me, the sly kid! Come over here, you redheaded devil, you, I'll kiss you without the bottle!"

This sent the others roaring with laughter again, though Bill was wondering if Richie had been half-serious. Come to think of it, Richie was wondering that, himself.

"So, are we playing?" asked Eddie, eyeing the bottle somewhat doubtfully. He hadn't actually thought they'd end up playing the game. His mother would have a heart attack if she knew exactly what her wee little Eddie was up to.

"I'll spin first," said Beverly quickly, and she leaned over and gave the bottle a good smack. It spun around and around, slowing down around Stan . . . and landing on herself.

"Huh," said Bill, staring down at the bottle and then at Beverly. "A-Are you suh-supposed t-to ki-kiss yourself or s-s-something?"

Beverly laughed. "I don't know. I think I'll spin again." She did, and it landed on Richie, of all people.

Bill watched Richie carefully for his expression. It really was kind of

funny that the one person who was quite sure he was gay would be kissing Beverly, out of all the chances. Richie's mouth was firmly clenched, so much that his lips had gone white, and when Beverly leaned in it ended up being less of a kiss and more of an awkward bumping of jaws.

"That was weird," said Richie, wiping his mouth in spite of the fact that Beverly probably hadn't even touched it. "I dunno if I like kissing that much. It might have just been Beverly. Yeah, I think it was you, Bevvie."

She hit him playfully on the arm. "Beep-beep, Richie," Beverly said, rolling her eyes. "Spin, it's your turn."

Richie shrugged and reached out to tap the bottle. The group watched with bated breath, as the glass spun around and around, the sunlight catching it in places so it sparkled. It slowed down, and Richie watched incredulously as it landed exactly in between Ben and Eddie.

"Uhh," said Eddie, staring at the bottle in a kind of dazed shock.

"What happens now?" Ben asked Stan, since it, after all, had been his idea in the first place.

"I think you flip a coin, or something," Stan said, shrugging. "It doesn't really matter. We could make up the rules, if we wanted, you know."

They ended up with the coin-flip. Richie was to toss the penny into the circle; if it came up heads, he'd have to kiss Eddie, and if it came up tails, he'd have to kiss Ben.

It came up heads.

Eddie gulped audibly. "Um, Richie," he said nervously. "This is going to be my first kiss . . ."

"Don't think of it as your first kiss," said Beverly bracingly. "It's just a game, Eddie, and it's not like we have to use tongues or anything."

"Right," said Eddie, but he still looked doubtful.

Richie swallowed and looked at Eddie, who was sitting to his right. Eddie looked back at Richie. They stared awkwardly at each other for nearly a minute before Bill rolled his eyes and said, "Juh-Jeez, you guys, just g-get it over with!"

Richie shut his eyes and leaned in, just as Eddie instinctively moved away. Unable to keep his balance, Eddie fell on his back and Richie toppled clumsily over him, his eyes shooting open. Quickly, before anymore awkwardness could ensue, Richie planted a quick, sloppy kiss on his mouth and pulled away immediately, staring down at the ground with a bright flush on his cheeks.

"That was even weirder," he muttered to himself, and he very privately wondered if that was what kissing other boys would be like for the rest of his life.

"Eddie?" said Beverly, prodding the boy in the arm. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah," said Eddie, sitting up and giving a slightly hysterical laugh. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took a couple of puffs on his aspirator. "I'm okay."

"H-How wuh-was ih-it?" asked Bill curiously, looking back and forth between his two friends.

Richie opened his mouth but Eddie beat him to it.

"Really . . . strange," he said faintly, licking his lips absentmindedly. He paused for a moment, then frowned thoughtfully. "Richie, did you know you taste like paper?"

Richie stared at him. "I taste like paper?"

"Well," said Eddie, and he licked his lips again, "kind of like paper, but there's a hint of something like grass in there, t-" He caught the looks the other kids were giving him and he coughed slightly, directing his stare at his shoes. "Um. Yeah."

"It's your turn to spin," said Ben quietly, sharing an amused look with Bill.

Eddie gulped and timidly poked the bottle. It whipped around and

then stopped almost instantly on Bill. He moaned and looked up apologetically at his friend. "I'm sorry, Big Bill!"

"It's n-not your fuh-fault, Eh-Eh-Eddie," Bill said, shrugging. A shadow of a grin flashed across his face. "I c-can't be mu-much wuh-worse th-than R-Richie, can I?"

"Nope," said Beverly, and Ben and Stan laughed. "Richie's the worst, honestly."

"Oy," said Richie, scowling. "I'll show ye. I'll show ye all one day, Richie Tozier is a damn foine kisser!"

Bill and Eddie's kiss ended as abruptly as it had started. Eddie, really too shy to initiate anything, merely sat there, his eyes shut, his expression frozen while Bill, with a small nervous laugh, had leaned over, pecked him on the lips once, and moved away.

"How was it?" Beverly asked Bill, her cheeks still very warm.

"N-Not as wuh-weird a-a-as I th-thought it w-was guh-guh-going t-to b-be," Bill said, and there was the barest of blushes on his face, as well. He coughed uneasily and leaned forward to push the bottle, hard. It spun ridiculously fast, making him feel kind of dizzy, and it only began to lose momentum after its fifteenth rotation or so. He followed the neck of the bottle with his eyes, breathing shallowly as it gradually slowed . . . and landed on Richie.

"I knew you had it bad for me, Big Bill," Richie said smugly, although inside, his heart was beating faster than a hummingbird's wings. "Sorry, off the market. I just made out with little Eds here and I'm afraid I fell in love." Eddie's eyes widened, before he quickly realized Richie was joking and let out a giggle. "Frankly, you're not my type, anyway, Denbrough."

"Fuck you, Trashmouth," said Bill, but there was a grin spread across his face. "G-Get over here, s-so I can see if you're as ba-bad as Beh-Beverly suh-says you are."

The other Losers laughed. Richie growled and shuffled over, tucking his glasses in his pocket, and before Bill could so much as blink,

Richie had pounced on him. He let out a muffled sound of surprise as Richie's lips met his own, but it wasn't like the other awkward kisses. It felt normal, it felt right, it felt like they should have been doing this every day. It scared Bill just a little bit, but it excited him even more. Richie, his face impossibly close to Bill, looked down at him while they kissed, then closed his eyes. After a tenth of a second, so did Bill.

Richie's tongue slyly slid over Bill's bottom lip, licking a path, claiming it as its own. Inhaling a sharp breath through his nose, Bill reflexively opened his mouth and then, suddenly, his tongue was out, too, wrestling with Richie's, attacking it in a wild, confused way, because neither of them really knew what they were doing, except they did. Richie took Bill's tongue between his lips and sucked it, and Bill thought that he was really, really starting to like kissing. He unintentionally let out a low, guttural moan, and Richie's eyes shot open, the sound shooting straight to his groin. With a gasp and a squeak, he rolled off Bill and shut his eyes.

The two boys simply lay there, panting, both of their cheeks a furious red, until Richie, avoiding everyone else's eyes, crawled back over to his spot and buried his face in his hands, trying desperately to vanquish the little problem he'd developed, the one he'd only experienced a few times in the past.

"I . . . I have to go," said Stan suddenly, and he took his book and his binoculars and left without another word.

"Me too," said Ben, and with a quick glance at Beverly, left in the same direction.

"Bill?" asked Beverly gently. Bill groaned and rolled over, putting his head in his arms. He said something incomprehensible. "What'd you say?"

"He said to leave him alone," said Eddie quietly, staring down at Bill. With a sigh, he got up and left.

After a moment's hesitation, still looking worriedly at Bill, Beverly did the same.

"Big Bill?" said Richie softly, once he was sure the others were gone. He slowly crawled back to lie next to Bill. "Shit, Bill, I'm so sorry. I swear to God I never meant –"

"S'okay, Ruh-Richie," Bill mumbled, finally turning back around and propping his head up by his elbow. "W-What was that?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," Richie answered, just as quietly, staring up at the sky, which was nothing but a blurry mess because he hadn't put his glasses back on. "I'm so fucked-up."

Bill sighed with exasperation. "R-Richie, we h-had this cuh-cuh-conversation before. Y-You're not fucked-up. I was ki-kissing back, wuh-wasn't I?"

Richie was silent for a while, and then he turned his head to look up at Bill, who had never shifted his gaze from Richie's face. "What does this mean?"

The question was spoken in a hushed voice, as though the Losers were sitting there again and thinking about what to do about the latest sighting of It. This was different, though, because it was just Richie. Just Richie and just Bill.

"I d-don't know," said Bill, then, after a moment, added, "You d-do taste like puh-paper and g-grass, you know. Eh-Eddie was right about th-that."

Richie simply smiled, and, just like the day before, they stayed there for a very long time.

3

Richie sighs and leans back in his chair, closing his eyes for a few minutes. His headache, which had started early that morning as soon as he had woken up, has been getting progressively worse throughout the entire day. With a sigh, he gets up and exits the studio, pausing briefly to discuss a few things with KLAD Program Director Steve Covall. He doesn't pay much attention, only answering the questions as shortly as he can, without the extra Voices and smart-ass remarks as he usually does; Steve notices

this and dismisses Richie almost right away. He is, of course, highly grateful for this, and heads home with the intention of downing a couple of aspirin and taking a good, long soak in the tub.

He's been feeling wound-up all week, rather like a music box, but instead of unwinding with a tinkly, bubbly song, he unwinds with headaches. Richie hasn't had such a bad case of migraines since . . . well, he can't remember, but a long time, in any case. They start when he wakes up in the morning, after a night full of dreams he mostly can't remember, and they end only when he next goes to bed, in complete defiance of the various pills Richie takes to try to get rid of the pain. In short, they are constantly with him. All the time.

Last night, Richie had finally managed to remember his dream. Vaguely, but still, it was there.

He had been a kid, and this was unusual in itself, because memories of his childhood were few and far between. He had been playing down in a clearing – the Barns, he thought they were called – with another kid, a tall kid with red hair. They must have only been ten or so.

"Come on, Big Bill, you know you can do it!" Richie had insisted, looking at the red-haired boy (whose name was, apparently, Big Bill) intensely.

"I cuh-can't, Ruh-Ruh-Richie," Big Bill had stuttered. "I'm suh-suh-sorry!"

"Come on, man," Richie had said, through gritted teeth. "Bill, you know you can, you just have to

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try harder!"

Bill groaned, staring down into the stream from where he was sitting by the edge. "Puh-Please, Ruh-Richie, just gi-give it up!"

"No!" Richie said, nearly yelling. He glared at Bill and repeated the phrase, enunciating each word slowly and clearly. "He thrusts his fists against the –"

"Stop it!" Bill said angrily. Richie did stop, but he was glaring at Bill. Bill glared back.

"Look, I'm sorry, Billy," Richie sighed reluctantly, looking away and ending the staring contest. "You know I just want to help you."

"I-I know, R-R-Richie," said Bill, who looked less angry now and more sad. "B-But my own mother has b-been trying to get m-me to say it for tuh-tuh-two years, Ruh-Richie. I just c-can't."

Richie lay spreadeagled on his back in the middle of the clearing and let out a frustrated noise.

"Trouble in paradise?"

Bill looked up – it was Eddie. He smiled weakly and sat down near Richie's left arm.

"Heyo, Eds," said Richie cheerfully, using up just enough energy to pinch Eddie on the cheek. "I've been trying to help mushmouth here with his speech."

"Oh," said Eddie, rubbing his pinched cheek. "That ghost thing?"

"Yeah. 'He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts.' Big Bill can only get as far as the fists and then he starts to spittle like a Llama."

"Beep-beep, Richie," said Eddie, frowning.

"Yeah, yeah," said Richie moodily, and then he suddenly turned his head to look up at Eddie with a big grin. "So, boyo, bin snoggin any foine lads lately?"

"Ha-ha, very funny, Richie," Eddie said, scowling.

Bill let out a snicker, which quickly turned into a cough. Wordlessly, Eddie passed him his aspirator and Bill took a few puffs, before giving it back.

"Must ha-have b-b-been all th-that puh-puh-practising we d-did before," he said hoarsely. "I th-think I g-got suh-uh-something ih-in my th-throat."

Eddie tucked his aspirator in his pocket, frowning again, but this time

out of worry for Bill. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Y-Yeah, I sh-sh-should be."

Richie shut his eyes miserably. "I'm terrible, aren't I? It's all my fault if you get sick or something."

"I-It's nuh-not your fuh-fault, R-Richie," said Bill, shuffling over to sit on Richie's right side. "Eh-Ennywuh-way, I d-don't get sick yuh-usually. I-I haven't b-been since l-last Seh-Seh-Seh—"

"September?" suggested Eddie helpfully.

Bill nodded. "I had the f-flu."

(last September, when you made that boat for Georgie)

"Ugh, I had the flu last year, too," said Richie, scrunching up his nose in distaste. "I'll never look at Vicks VapoRub the same again."

"M-Me t-too," agreed Bill. *And I'll never hear Für Elise the same again.*

"I've never had the flu. Is it awful?" Eddie asked curiously.

Richie grimaced. "Your nose gets plugged up really bad, but snot keeps flying out and down your throat and stuff. It's really gross."

"Tck!" Eddie shivered. "Sometimes I'm glad Ma keeps me so sheltered." At Bill's and Richie's equal expressions of incredulity, he repeated, "*Sometimes.*"

"What would she say if she knew what you were doing yesterday?" Richie asked, a mischievous grin on his face.

"She wouldn't know, for starters," Eddie said quickly, "and besides, we didn't *do* anything!" He dug his aspirator out and took a puff on it. "We only, you know, kissed, and we, uh, didn't use tongues or anything. Bev said so." He blushed a bright red.

"True," said Richie fairly. He tried hard not to think about the kiss he and Bill had shared, of which tongues definitely had been involved. "Eds, how do you feel about the queers?" he asked pseudo-casually.

Eddie's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Nothing. Just curious." That might have been enough to get an answer out of Eddie, if only Richie hadn't quickly added, "What if you found out one of your best buds was queer? What would ya do, Eds? Huh? Huh?"

Bill stifled a laugh. *Richie, Richie, Richie.*

"I . . . um," said Eddie, looking extremely uncomfortable. "I wouldn't mind, I guess. I mean, he'd still be my friend. It'd get weird for a while, but . . ." He trailed off awkwardly.

"Eh-Eh-Eddie," Bill said, with a quick, surveying look down at Richie, "I th-think Ruh-Richie has suh-suh-something to t-tell you."

Richie sighed, sitting up and looking at everything except Eddie's face. "Eds, I – uh – I'm –"

"This actually —m-might be kwuh-quicker if I suh-say it," Bill said teasingly.

"Shut up, mushmouth," Richie muttered darkly. He took a deep breath. It was two days ago all over again. With the fear that Eddie would avoid him and stop being his friend and eventually hate him, with the fear that he would die alone, the fear that everyone in Derry would find out and Henry Bowers, Belch Huggins and Victor Criss would have a much bigger reason to beat Richie up than for his glasses or his running mouth. He knew he could trust Eddie, though, and even if Eddie did end up avoiding him, he'd still have Bill.

"Richie, what're you gonna tell me?" Eddie asked, his voice afraid and incredibly curious at the same time. It was a rare thing indeed when Richie was silent for more than twenty seconds.

"Let me put it this way," Richie said finally. "Yesterday, I . . . uh . . . I liked kissing you and Big Bill. And I . . . didn't like kissing Beverly. At all."

Eddie blinked a couple of times, before his eyes widened comically and he gasped.

"Y-You're okay wuh-with it, though, r-r-right, E-Eddie?" asked Bill, as hurriedly as he could manage.

Eddie used his aspirator several times. When he had put it back in his pocket, he stared down at Richie and, after a pause, said, "Yes, I'm okay with it. You're still a really good friend, Richie. Being . . . that way doesn't change who you are."

Richie exhaled a great breath of relief. "Thanks, Eds. You have no clue how much that means to me."

"When are you going to tell the others?" Eddie asked. Richie and Bill exchanged a glance.

"Well, the thing is, I don't know," Richie said, frowning. "To tell you the truth, Eds, I'm real lucky that you and Bill didn't go all psycho and homophobic on me. I don't know if the others will be as . . . accommodating."

"Beverly won't mind," said Eddie, sounding very sure of himself. "I dunno about Stan or Ben, but I know Beverly's okay with that stuff. She made us play Spin the Bottle yesterday, didn't she?"

"Yeah, maybe," mumbled Richie. "But I don't think I'm ready to tell anyone else just yet."

"Y-Yeah, juh-just wait uh-until you're r-ready, R-R-Richie," said Bill.

Eddie hesitated for a moment, seeming to debate something in his head. "Richie, I just want you to know that I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me these things," he said.

Richie grinned at him.

"How can I not trust a *cute* thing such as yourself?" he said gaily, pinching Eddie's cheeks some more.

Eddie blushed furiously and hit Richie on the shoulder. "Stop it! You *know* I hate it when you do that!"

"Aww," said Richie, pouting and putting on his puppy eyes. "Did I give the wittle baby an owie?"

Eddie, despite himself, grinned. "I'll give you an owie soon enough if you don't shut the fuck up, Trashmouth."

"A-And I'll help h-him," Bill added, holding up a fist threateningly.

Richie roared with laughter. "Eds and Billy Boy Get Off A Good One!" he exclaimed in his MovieTone Newsreel Announcer Voice. Then his face sobered and he hooked his arms around the shoulders of his two friends, the best friends he had ever had and would ever have. He hadn't known how lucky he was until that moment. "Thank you both. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I didn't have the two of you."

"Same g-goes for y-you, Ruh-Richie," said Bill, smiling and wrapping his right arm around Richie's back.

"We'll always be here for each other," declared Eddie solemnly, also wrapping an arm around his friend's back and leaning his head into his shoulder. "Always."

And though he wasn't sure if Eddie's promise would hold out until the end, he knew Eddie meant it with all his heart, and Richie thought that maybe that was what really counted.

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Richie gasps, his eyes shooting open. He's been relaxing in the bath like he had planned, and nearly fell asleep against the back edge of the white porcelain tub.

"Christ," he mutters to himself, pulling the plug and getting up to towel himself off. After he's dry and wearing his favourite lightly lavender-scented bathrobe, Richie heads into his bedroom to lay down on the bed. That damn headache is still there, of course.

Not for the first time, he wonders about his childhood, though this time it is caused by that dream he had the previous night. He can imagine the simple things, like how his parents looked like in their early thirties and how he was always getting A's and B's in schoolwork (but regularly C's and D's in conduct – he had to grin at this), but anything else was a blur. He had tried several times to remember the friends he might've had, or

even the bullies he was sure he had, but none had come up. In fact, his happiest childhood memory so far had been getting a big ten dollars for Christmas when he was around eight. But there were absolutely none about his friends, none he could remember.

Groaning, Richie pulls the covers over himself and attempts to fall asleep, willing the lavender to do its job. He tries to look up to the fact that tomorrow is his day off, but that only makes him sad because he will have nothing to distract himself with. He opens his eyes and stares at the bright red LED numbers on his digital alarm clock. It is just after nine o'clock, and normally he would never ever so much as consider going to bed this early, but he finds himself almost . . . thrilled at the prospect of another dream, another memory. Richie wonders if the memories will ever fully come back again.

Someone knocks loudly at his front door, and as he shouts for whoever it is to come back the next morning, he does not realize that the answer to all of his questions is standing on the other side of it. Some would consider Richie Tozier lucky that the person at the door does not give up, and some would consider him highly unfortunate.

Either way, Richie does get up and put on his glasses, as he really cannot be bothered with the contacts despite the fact that the glasses make him look like a complete dork. He pulls the bathrobe tighter around himself as he grumpily stomps down the stairs and yanks the door open.

"What do you –?"

The sentence is left hanging in midair as Richie stares at the man on his doorstep, who looks as though he's been to hell and back and not all that sure of why exactly he is there, and Richie instinctively catches him as he collapses into unconsciousness.